

What to Pray When You Don't Know What to Pray

Matthew 26:36-46

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I would imagine any religious tour of the Holy Land would include a visit to the Garden of Gethsemane. I've never been there but I've seen pictures, and it looks beautiful. It's a peaceful little garden among a grove of ancient olive trees, looking back at the eastern wall of Jerusalem. I'm sure it's a meaningful place to visit.

But there are other Gethsemanes in the world and these places aren't so picturesque. My guess is we've all been to at least one of them. They are the places where no one wants to be, places of agony and of fear, places where times are so traumatic you don't even know what to pray. As we continue our sermon series on prayer this morning, we're going to look at Jesus' time of prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane.

This event in Matthew occurs right after the Last Supper in the Upper Room and right before Jesus' arrest. It's not an easy passage to deal with. William Barclay said it's a passage we must approach on our knees. Jesus knows what's coming, he knows God's plan, and he wants to take time to pray to prepare himself for it. He brings along three of his most trusted disciples, hoping that they will provide strength and support for him as he prepares for his final hours. It's good to have friends and family around us during times like these.

This passage is a bit unnerving and could shake our faith a bit. The picture of Jesus here is not one of a confident Messiah, turning over tables and casting out demons. This is not Jesus the heroic action figure. He doesn't say, "I'll be back!" He says, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." He wants his friends close by. This is Jesus at his most human.

And can you blame him? No one wants to die at 33, especially in such a brutal way as crucifixion. Jesus realizes that this is it. Gethsemane is that place in life where you realize you are out of options. No amount of bargaining can save you. You are on your knees. You are afraid to go forward and you can't go back. Things are bad, but something worse might be on its way.

Gethsemane for me was a hospital bed in Columbus, Ind., where I waited to hear a doctor's diagnosis. I knew I couldn't go back, but I really didn't want to go forward, either. Hospital rooms often turn into Gethsemanes. As do funeral homes and tension-filled family rooms. And the boss' office. And a courtroom. There are other Gethsemanes in the world and life changes forever there. Something dies. Something is never the same.

So what do you pray during those times? What do you pray when you don't know what you want to happen? Sure, it would be great if God would swoop down and miraculously cure us or rescue us from our own bad decisions. But if we know in our hearts that we have to move forward and we don't know what lies ahead, what do we pray?

Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane is both surprising and instructive. First, it's interesting to note that Jesus' natural response to the crisis is prayer. He already had developed a relationship with God, so during his darkest hour, he turns to God almost as an involuntary action. On one of our mission trips, a youth fell and hurt her tailbone. While we waited for an ambulance, the host minister gathered us around the girl and said, "C'mon, let's be about doing what we're supposed to do." And we prayed for her. In Gethsemane, we are often rendered so helpless, so immobile, that the only thing we can do is pray. Prayer is a necessity because otherwise life would feel intolerable.

If you didn't know this story, what would you expect Jesus to say in his prayer? How would you expect the Messiah to pray at this moment? "Dear God, I'm ready, let's get this thing moving." "Dear God, I trust that everything's going to be OK, so bring on the Romans." I would probably expect Jesus to exude a quiet confidence in the face of death.

Instead, we get this: "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me." What? Jesus can't say that! He's Jesus! And yet, this statement is full of the last thing you would expect from the Messiah – fear. Jesus is afraid. He doesn't want to go through with what lies ahead. He knows what is to come, and if it's all the same to God, Jesus would rather take a pass. Jesus knows what it is like to struggle when he prayed.

Fear is an incredibly strong motivator in our lives. It can either drive us to do things we shouldn't, or keep us from doing things we should. Jesus had the prescient knowledge to know exactly what was coming, but often times our fear is driven more by what we don't know. When the future is uncertain, we often fill in the blanks in our own mind with worst-case scenarios.

My grandmother used to live in California, and one summer when I was about eight I went to visit her. Now, I was a bit apprehensive about the visit because I knew that California was the home of Bigfoot, and I had an intense fear of Bigfoot. Forget that Bigfoot lived in Northern California and my grandmother lived in Los Angeles. I was sure that if Bigfoot knew I was in the state, he would track me down.

One day my grandmother went outside for a minute, and I was left in her mobile home by myself. Mobile homes tend to creak and groan a bit, and every time I heard a noise I pictured those big hairy paws reaching out to grab me. I ended up running outside and waiting in the middle of the street for my grandmother to come back. If Bigfoot was going to get me, I wanted witnesses.

Fear of what could lie ahead is a powerful force in our lives and even Jesus wasn't immune to it. It may sound odd, but that's comforting to me. When Jesus is facing his ultimate test, he doesn't do so with supreme confidence. He's scared. "Father, if it's possible, don't make me go through this." If our Savior was scared, then he knows what I feel like when I am in my own Gethsemane.

Jesus' prayer doesn't end there. He goes on to say, "Yet not as I will, but as you will." Ah, there's that "will" word again. Remember in the Lord's prayer? "THY will be done." Prayer is not about bending God to our wills. It is about inviting God's will into our lives – even if God's will doesn't match our will.

That's hard. I always want God's will to match mine. When I pray for someone to be healed, I want that to be God's will. When I pray for something good to happen to me or someone I love, I want that to be God's will. Are those bad things to pray for? I'm not praying for God to hurt anyone or dump a load of money on me or break a natural law. I simply want what I think is best.

Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane illustrates a crucial concept about how we are to pray during such times. Even in his fear and struggle, Jesus models for us how to accept what we can't understand, how to trust in God's presence even when it feels like God is absent. When we pray as Jesus prays here, we might not see how God is working or understand how God will bring good out of a situation, but by praying we are affirming that we believe God is present and working, so we relinquish our own rights and pray that God's will be done.

It's fitting that the Garden of Gethsemane is an olive tree grove. In fact, the name probably means "olive press." Olives would be picked and pressed and the oil then used for a variety of purposes, including in anointing. A person was anointed with oil as a way of

signifying God's presence with them, as a way of consecrating them for God's work. In fact, the term "Messiah" literally means "the anointed one."

So maybe our Gethsemanes are not only places of struggle, places of pain, but also places of anointing. Maybe our Gethsemanes are not only places of darkness and death, but places of resurrection and new life. My time in a hospital bed gave me a new understanding of the power of prayer and opened up opportunities for me to minister to others. Maybe our Gethsemanes are places where God anoints us, consecrates us, calls us to be faithful. In our Gethsemane prayers, we kneel before God to receive anointing so we can then stand up and face our challenges.

One thing is for sure: there's no running away from our fears. The paths of our lives lead us through Gethsemane, not around it. We all will spend time in the garden, driven to our knees by our struggles and our despair. And we may feel like our prayers are not being heard or answered. Realize that even Jesus heard "no" as an answer to his prayer. The cup was not taken from him. God did not save him from his future. But that doesn't mean Jesus didn't pray hard enough or that he wasn't faithful enough. Sometimes there are things in life that we simply cannot understand.

So we walk into our Gethsemane times in life, knowing we can't go back, afraid to go forward. But we do not face those fears alone. We are accompanied by the one who spent time in the real Gethsemane, with a soul overwhelmed with sorrow. Jesus is with us during those times. And as we pray for God's will to be done, we are reminded that on the other side of Gethsemane, resurrection awaits. It may not be exactly what we want, it may not be our will, but we trust that it is God's will, and that God will be with us. When we're in those dark times, we need to be about doing what we're supposed to do. "Lord, please take this cup from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."